

MICHIGAN'S LGBTQ+ NEWS SOURCE SINCE 1993

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TRANS MURDER IN SOUTHGATE

Police probe Tahiry Bloom
death as hate crime

'RADICAL INDOCTRINATION'

Michigan educators weigh
student impact of Trump order

COMEDY AS COMMUNITY

How Fortune Feimster
creates joyful resistance

A Queer Legacy, Against the Odds

In conservative West Michigan, Grand Rapids'
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By Chris Azzopardi + Sarah Bricker Hunt

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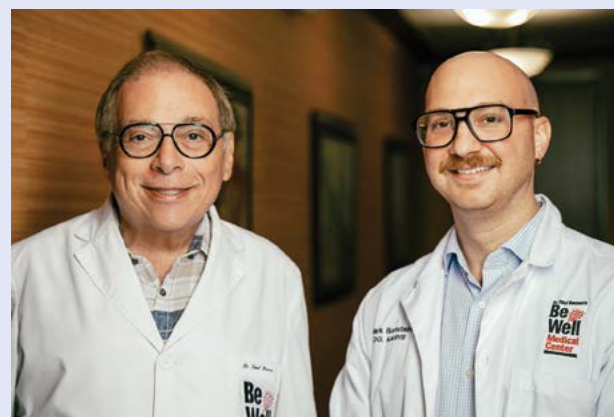
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Dr. Benson and Dr. Bornstein



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Bobby Johnson at The Apartment Lounge.
Photo: Terry Johnston

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5 Queer Things You Can Do Right Now-ish

BY KELLI DUNHAM

They say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Doesn't that make you want to punch whoever "they" is right in the head? And not they as in the pronoun of many people we love, of course — but the anonymous, smug "they" who insists we need more resilience.

So if the current situation has you wanting to hide under your bed rather than come out swinging, grab a bingo card, a paintbrush or a video game controller and rediscover your inner warrior. Whether you're screaming at a "Drag Race" watch party, sketching with queer artists or celebrating a decade of trans joy, there's no shortage of ways to connect, laugh and maybe even win a fabulous prize or two.

And let's be real — what doesn't kill might just make you more fabulous.



Zozey Gaychanel (left) and Sophia Von Stardust. Courtesy photo

Play Drag Queen Bingo at North Star Lounge

Bingo? Fun. Bingo hosted by fabulous drag queens? Iconic. Drag Bingo at North Star Lounge is your chance to win prizes, make friends and bask in the glow of queer joy. Hosted by Zozey Gaychanel, Ursula Rising and Sophia Von Stardust, this event is less about "B-12" and more about "Be yourself." As Gaychanel tells BTL: "Supporting drag shows right now is critically important for keeping our community spaces alive. Drag Bingo has always been a magical escape from the political mess outside — and we are eternally grateful to North Star Lounge for being our version of Chappell Roan's Pink Pony Club."

Bring your good vibes, a lucky dauber (or maybe a fabulous one) and make sure to check out North Star Lounge's other queer Thursday offerings as well.

Feb. 20, 7 p.m., North Star Lounge (301 North 5th Ave., Ann Arbor).



Share the Love with Stand with Trans

Do your love languages include words of affirmation, acts of service and playing video games with your favorite trans pals? Stand with Trans is celebrating 10 years of building community with Share the Love, an event full of joy, connection and activities ranging from face painting to a nail polish station to music by DJ CleoTheeDoll. Plus, organizers haven't forgotten the introverts and the exhausted: there will be nooks for quiet reading and journaling!

If you're looking for a space to be yourself (and maybe show off your Mario Kart skills), this is it.

March 1, 5-8 p.m., Orchard United Methodist Church (30450 Farmington Road, Farmington Hills). Registration and more information at bit.ly/STLOVE2025.



Onya Nurve. Photo: Instagram/@onyanurve

Go to a 'RuPaul's Drag Race' Watch Party

The only thing better than watching "RuPaul's Drag Race"? Watching it in a room full of people who will also scream when a queen pulls off an impossible reveal.

Five15 in Royal Oak is throwing a watch party where you can catch the drama, the looks and Onya Nurve's live appearance on March 7. Over at Arcenciel in Detroit, weekly "Drag Race" nights mean you can sip, gossip and dissect who's serving and who's sashaying away.

Onya Nurve appearance: March 7, 8 p.m., Five15 (600 S Washington Ave., Royal Oak). Reservations and more information at bit.ly/dragraceonyalive

"Drag Race" watch parties: Fridays, 7 p.m., Arcenciel (5001 Grand River Ave., Detroit). More information and reservations at arcencieldetroit.com/events.



Artwork by Chris Azzopardi

Sketch with Other Queer Artists

Detroit Queer Sketch Series (DQSS) isn't just a place to doodle — it's a place to create, connect and maybe even discover your inner Bob Ross. Led by James Staycation, this event happens twice a month and welcomes everyone, from experienced artists to folks who haven't picked up a pencil since high school. The twice-monthly artistic gatherings have grown and evolved since DQSS started in 2023.

"The biggest update," Staycation told BTL, "is that we're adding more instructional elements. We've always been open to all skill levels, but now we're guiding beginners who feel intimidated by a blank page — and giving experienced artists new ways to freshen up their skills." Grab a sketchbook (or just show up — no pressure) and be part of something colorful.

First Mondays and third Thursdays every month, 6:30 p.m., Detroit GT Studio (2301 Wolcott, Ferndale). More information bit.ly/DetroitQSS.



Just Snazz. Photo: Instagram/@justsnazz_

Support Black Queer Artists

Search for Black queer artists to follow, listen to and support during Black History Month in February, yes, and all year 'round!

Some of my favorites include:

Just Snazz: a brilliant Black queer hip-hop artist from Detroit whose song "Black Corolla" has a playlist all its own on my music feed and is an antidote to influencers shaming the rest of us for having non-aspirational lives.

Calvin Cato: a comedian and writer who is both hilarious and nerdy — one of my favorite combinations. Calvin writes new material so quickly you may never run out of Calvin to watch!

Mav Magick: a nonbinary content creator randomly suggested to me by the YouTube algorithm gods who has now become one of my favorite places to turn for political and emotional commentary.



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After Backlash from Michigan's LGBTQ+ Community, Corewell Health Reverses Gender-Affirming Care Decision

Medical provider had barred hormone treatment for new patients

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

In a powerful display of unity and protest, the LGBTQ+ community and its allies recently joined together to demand change, leading Corewell Health to reverse its controversial decision to restrict gender-affirming care for new patients under 19. The reversal followed intense pressure from advocacy groups and healthcare organizations throughout Michigan.

The health system, Michigan's largest, had briefly become the first in the state to limit such services before quickly changing course. The reversal came after a coordinated response from advocacy organizations and healthcare providers who warned of potentially devastating consequences for transgender youth and their families.

"We see this decision as one that's family-centered, equality-centered and science-centered," said Equality Michigan Executive Director Erin Knott following Corewell's announcement about restricting gender-affirming care. "The pain and confusion endured by families and young people who had appointments cancelled was tragic and avoidable. The best time to make the right decision was yesterday, but the next best time to make the right decision was today."

Over 40 organizations joined forces to challenge Corewell's decision, spearheaded by Equality Michigan, which released an open letter Feb. 11 calling for an immediate policy reversal.

The coalition's efforts gained significant legal backing from Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel, who recently issued guidance clarifying that healthcare facilities must comply with Michigan's anti-discrimination laws, regardless of federal funding considerations. These laws explicitly protect individuals based on gender identity and expression.

Among the first organizations to take



William Beaumont University Hospital. Photo: Corewell Health



Julia Music. Photo: Andrew Potter

concrete action was Ferndale Pride, which rejected and returned Corewell Health's sponsorship funding for its annual Pride fest. "With last week's announcement and multiple reports to LGBTQ+ advocacy agencies about Corewell Health refusing gender-affirming care to trans individuals, we cannot take this situation lightly," Julia Music, Ferndale Pride's executive director, said in a statement. The decision carried particular weight given Corewell Health's position as both a longtime festival sponsor and one of Ferndale's largest employers.

Southeast Michigan organizations took leading roles in the advocacy effort. Stand with Trans, LGBT Detroit, Affirmations, Transgender Michigan and the Ruth Ellis Center joined forces with PFLAG Detroit, PFLAG Clinton Township, Detroit Disability Power and the NAACP Michigan State Conference, underscoring the

intersectional nature of healthcare access issues.

The coalition's open letter, addressed to Corewell Health's Board of Directors and Executive Leadership in Grand Rapids, warned of broader implications. "If health care for transgender people can be denied across the country without due process, without legislative action and without the scrutiny of the courts, tomorrow, we could see similarly contrived assaults on the bodily autonomy of women and girls, access lifesaving treatments for HIV or any other matter at the intersection of health care and individual rights," the letter stated.

Corktown Health, a Detroit-based LGBTQ-focused healthcare provider, emphasized the medical community's ethical principle to "do no harm" and stressed the importance of maintaining vital treatment for young people currently under care.

The rapid resolution represents one of the largest coordinated responses to healthcare policy changes affecting the LGBTQ+ community in Michigan's recent history.

"This situation demonstrates both the strength of our community and the ongoing need for vigilance in protecting healthcare access," said Cheryl Czach, executive director of Affirmations, after Corewell reversed course. "While we welcome Corewell Health's reversal, we must remain committed to ensuring consistent, comprehensive healthcare access for all members of our community."

For those seeking support or resources, community leaders encourage reaching out to their nearest LGBTQ+ community center. The swift community response and successful resolution demonstrate the strong network of advocacy organizations working to protect healthcare access for transgender individuals across Michigan.

Community organizations are planning follow-up meetings with Corewell Health leadership to discuss long-term strategies for maintaining and expanding access to gender-affirming care across the state. In the meantime, two federal judges have paused Trump's executive order while court cases play out.

Suspect Charged in Murder of Tahiry Broom, Trans Woman Killed in Southfield

Police are considering hate crime charges

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

The Michigan LGBTQ+ community is grieving the loss of Tahiry Broom, a 29-year-old transgender woman from Cleveland who was fatally shot in Southfield on Feb. 9. Robert Ridges III, 28, has been charged with second-degree murder in connection with her death.

“We unfortunately, as a community, just closed the chapter in receiving justice for another trans woman of color, Ashia Davis, and now, less than 90 days later, we are hoping to get justice for Tahiry Broom,” Julisa Abad, victim advocate and Director of Outreach at Fair Michigan, told BTL. “The violence that my community faces goes to show that this is an epidemic that is not ending anytime soon.”

Prosecutors allege that Ridges met Broom near the Riverstone Apartments complex before



Tahiry Broom. Widely distributed photo

Certainly, a joy to her life.”

In a statement, Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald emphasized the fundamental right to safety for all individuals. “Every person is entitled to live without fear of violence. Tahiry Broom had family and friends who loved her. She did not deserve to die and her killer will be brought to justice,” McDonald said.

Speaking with WXYZ Detroit, local trans rights advocate Jeynce Poindexter highlighted how increasing anti-trans rhetoric contributes to violence against the community. “What continues to happen is, by the trans community being labeled as the other and constantly ostracized, it allows for victimization to creep in at every angle... harassment, discrimination, violence, the threat of, or essentially in this case, murder. Hatred breeds hatred,” Poindexter told the outlet.

“I’m so grateful that the defendant is already in custody and I am confident that Karen McDonald and the Oakland County Prosecutor’s Office will make sure that she, her family and our community continue to get justice,” Abad said. “I want my community to continue to be vigilant. Continue to report crimes and continue to come forward, and if you have any information, please reach out to the Fair Michigan Justice Project, so that every Michigander is safe.”

Learn more about the Fair Michigan Justice Project at fairmichigan.org/fair-michigan-justice-project.

“What continues to happen is, by the trans community being labeled as the other and constantly ostracized, it allows for victimization to creep in at every angle... Hatred breeds hatred.”

— Jeynce Poindexter, trans rights advocate

the shooting occurred following an altercation. According to multiple reports, Broom was found dead, facedown in the snow outside the apartment complex on the morning of Feb. 9.

Ridges was arrested at the MGM Grand Casino in Detroit hours later. He faces multiple charges, including second-degree murder, carrying a concealed weapon and felony firearm possession. Ridges’ bond was denied and his next court appointment is Feb. 26.

Southfield Police are considering hate crime charges, according to Fox 2 Detroit.

Southfield Police Chief Elvin Barren told the outlet that he had spoken to Broom’s mother. “She shared with me how much she meant to her, how she was a very intelligent person,” Barren said. “She mentioned that it was a joy.

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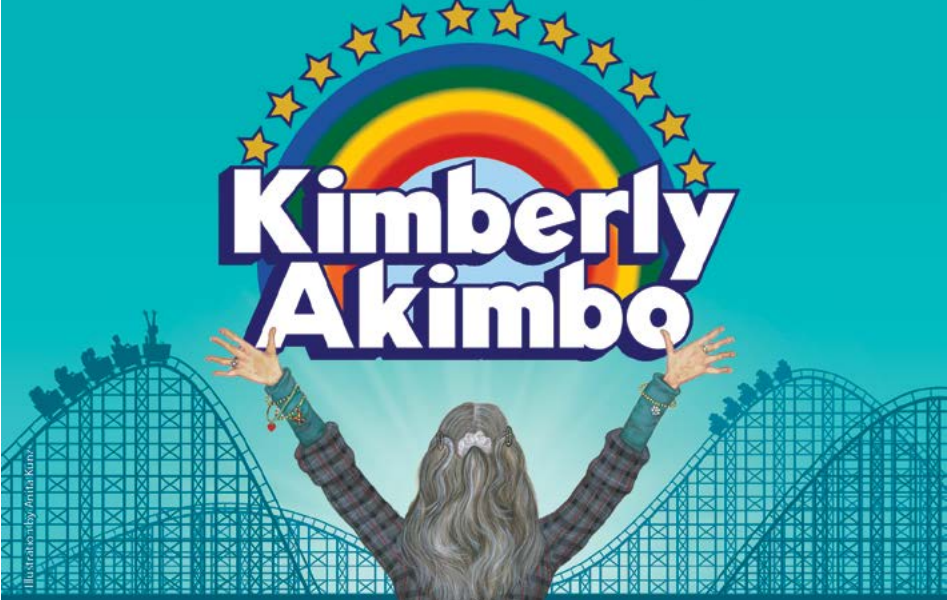
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Why Michigan Educators and Leaders Are Worried About Trump's 'Radical Indoctrination' Executive Order



Guidelines target social transitions, bathroom usage and more

BY BLAKE BYLE

Donald Trump's Jan. 29 executive order targeting transgender youth, "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling," has intensified concerns among Michigan educators and students already reeling from a series of anti-LGBTQ directives.

The order follows his earlier executive actions, including

a nationwide ban on gender-affirming care for anyone under 19 and restrictions on transgender participation in sports. While other orders have focused on medical care and athletics, this directive takes aim at schools themselves, threatening to withhold federal funding from institutions that support students' gender identity choices

and potentially criminalizing educators who help transgender youth.

What's in the order?

Signed into effect on Jan. 29, the order claims that parental

oversight from schools has been "usurped" and that parents have seen schools indoctrinate their children with "radical, anti-American ideologies," effectively labeling trans youth and advocates as "anti-American."

The executive order takes two concrete actions regarding federal funding: If it withstands challenges in court, it will immediately

rescind funding from existing K-12 programs, curriculum, instruction and teacher-related activities (certification, education and employment) that involve what it terms “gender ideology.” Second, it will withdraw funding from schools that continue such practices after the order takes effect.

While the order doesn’t enumerate specific programs that will lose funding, if it survives expected legal challenges, it would empower U.S. Attorney General Pete Hegseth to collaborate with state attorneys general to enforce these measures. This enforcement includes both withdrawing federal funds and prosecuting school staff deemed to “directly or indirectly support” student “social transition.”

“Social transition” is defined in the order as adopting a gender identity other than the sex assigned at birth. This language is problematic because it conflates sex and gender. Those are very different, especially for nonbinary and trans youth.

The order goes on to exemplify how educators and staff would contribute to the process of a student’s social transition. For instance, staff would be found liable for engaging in the following: providing counseling, allowing a student to use the bathroom, locker room or participate in athletics of the gender that they identify with, using a student’s preferred name or pronouns or even just calling a student nonbinary.

In essence, this executive order decrees that educators and school staff must traumatize their trans students by outing them to their parents, denying them therapy, deadnaming them, and subjecting them to potential physical and emotional violence both at school and at home.

Community reaction

Community leaders are speaking out against the executive order and remain committed to protecting the ability of students to choose their own identities.

In a video shared to social media, Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel responded to the order, stating in part, “There are no laws on the books [in

Michigan] that involve prosecuting people for ‘radical indoctrination,’ whatever that is.”

Nessel also urged students and educators to stay calm, saying, “Please don’t be looking over your shoulder or wondering when the state police are going to storm your classroom. We are not coming into your schools to investigate you for teaching in accordance with whatever your curriculum is for your particular school district.” She continues, “We support teachers. We want you to continue doing your jobs, continue serving kids and families all across the state of Michigan and making sure that our children have a brighter future.”

This is a welcome message from a top state official, but what have the impacts been on the ground?

Anthony Pennock, a teacher in the Battle Creek area and co-chair of the Michigan Education Association LGBTQ+ Caucus, voiced his experience and

expression, the expansion of the Michigan Hate Crimes Act earlier this year and the recent passage of House Bills 5300 and 5303, which updated Michigan’s legal name change process and enshrined transgender Michiganders with access to self-determination on birth certificates.

Despite these federal

out of fear or districts governed by school boards that align politically with the Trump administration’s goals and aims. Some boards, he notes, are filled with “Moms for Liberty” people. “I remind folks who are concerned that the school board needs to be accessible to them and vice versa,” he advises. “Find a friendly one and go get

nowhere.”

Another teacher, who works at a public school in Michigan’s thumb region and wished to remain anonymous, said that in her district, there truly hasn’t been much change: “For most of my students this is all they’ve ever known. They’ve never known life not under Trump.”

Mostly, the teacher said, her district has not communicated about the order. “But my interpretation of their silence is, if they issue statements and say things, it will raise attention for people who agree with this order, and that if we can just conduct business as usual, maybe we can maintain a status quo,” she said. “And I do understand that thinking, because unfortunately there are teachers who do agree with this order. They pose the biggest risk of exposure and damage to the culture we’ve worked so hard to build.”

As an educator and member of the LGBTQ+ community, the teacher acknowledged it has been difficult to navigate continued attacks from the Trump administration — all while being asked to operate like everything is normal.

“It’s been hard,” she said. “I feel like I have to put this layer of protection around myself, not necessarily to protect my job but to protect my reputation if I get fed up. But there has been a lot of progress in the last eight years and I don’t see that changing instantly because of this.”



Anthony Pennock (left), courtesy photo, and Attorney General Dana Nessel, State of Michigan photo.



“We need to pause, breathe, reflect intentionally and then get back to work because we ain’t going nowhere.”

— Anthony Pennock, co-chair, Michigan Education Association LGBTQ+ Caucus

concerns with BTL.

“My trans students are terrified and my trans staff are terrified,” Pennock said. “So, I sent something out, as the union president, and said, look, we are going to stand for you and we are going to protect you as much as we can.”

Pennock noted that there are many protections for the LGBTQ+ community in Michigan, including the expanded Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act, which was amended in 2022 to include discrimination protections related to sexual identity and gender

executive orders, Michigan’s state level protections and our anti-discrimination laws still stand. States have the authority to enforce their own civil rights legislation within their jurisdictions. Additionally, Michigan’s constitution grants powers to the governor to form a Civil Rights Commission. Pennock concluded, “We have some very strong laws that protect us in the state of Michigan – as much as we’re scared, we have it pretty good here.”

Pennock sees the true threat in districts that could change policies

coffee, go to lunch, have dinner, have a conversation — share your experience and how they on the board can help you, because if we just live in the fear, that far fringe is going to get into the minds of the board, and the board makes the policy for the district.”

Pennock acknowledged that it has been a difficult period since Trump took office on Jan. 20. “[It has] been taxing on all of us emotionally and some of us physically,” he said. “We need to pause, breathe, reflect intentionally and then get back to work because we ain’t going

Remembering Jody Valley: The BTL Columnist Who Gave LGBTQ+ Readers a Lifeline

Before TikTok advice went viral, Valley was a lifeline for queer readers

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Jody Amelia-Ann Valley, who passed away on Dec. 28, 2024, just shy of her 83rd birthday, left behind more than just an advice column — she created a lifeline for LGBTQ+ folks when they needed it most. Her “Dear Jody” column in *Between The Lines* and on *PrideSource.com* was a beacon of wisdom for the queer community throughout the late ’90s and early 2000s, long before the days of Instagram polls and Reddit advice threads.

When I joined *Between The Lines* in 2006, readers could still reach out to Valley the old-school way — through snail mail or her trusty Hotmail account. Her style was plain-spoken but always kind, offering the sort of genuine connection that feels rare in today’s rapid-fire digital world.

From “Terrified of trucks” to “Addicted to bathhouses,” Valley tackled it all. Her column became the heart of BTL, dishing out thoughtful advice on everything from relationship drama to the challenges of being LGBTQ+ in a sometimes hostile world. As a Native American woman, out lesbian and veteran social worker, she brought both professional expertise and personal understanding to her responses. She worked with the LGBTQ+ community both as a counselor and a workshop leader in the areas of coming out, self-esteem and relationship issues.

Valley’s activism went way beyond the column. Since the ’60s, she’d been a staunch advocate for women’s rights, reproductive

freedom, LGBTQ+ rights and racial equality. She served as president of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Greater Lansing and wrote for the *Lansing State Journal*, always amplifying voices that needed to be heard.

“Porn is such a subjective thing. What’s one person’s porn is another person’s art form,” she once told a reader struggling with their boyfriend’s habits. To someone facing financial disaster and heartbreak, she wrote: “You can’t do anything about your past, but you can work towards a future.”

When she wasn’t writing, Jody was living life to the fullest — biking, hiking, kayaking and sledding well into her golden years. She was a diehard Michigan Wolverines and Detroit Lions fan, and created magical spaces for her grandkids, complete with fairy forests and secret clubhouses. Even in retirement,

she kept creating, publishing three mystery novels with Bella Books and taking up wood carving. On March 22, 2014, she married her longtime partner Elaine Thomason. Together, they celebrated the Supreme Court decision to legalize same-sex marriage on June 26, 2015 at the Ingham County Courthouse in Mason.

Valley’s advice still feels relevant in today’s turbulent times. Back in 2003, when a reader was overwhelmed by world events, she offered wisdom that still rings true: “You are keeping all the war/terrorist information right up there in front of your moment-to-moment daily life. No wonder you are anxious!” Her suggestion? Step back from the news cycle and focus on finding moments of joy instead.

One of her most powerful exchanges came in 2006, when she responded to a mother who had rejected her gay son, only to lose

him to a drug overdose months later. The mother’s letter was both confession and warning: “I know that I ruined his life...and mine as well. I rejected him. I wanted him to live a life that was my dream, not his.” Valley’s compassionate response feels particularly poignant today, as anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric surges across the country. “I’m hoping that you can forgive yourself. I also hope that you continue to let others know what you have learned; your son would be proud of you for that,” she wrote.

Valley’s final bit of down-to-earth wisdom came through a Cookie Monster meme she shared on Facebook in 2024: “Today me will live in the moment unless it’s unpleasant in which case me will eat a cookie.” As we continue forward in a world that feels overwhelming at times, we could all do worse than take a page from Jody’s playbook: in the midst of life’s chaos, sometimes it’s just about finding that sliver of sweetness.



BTL Dear Jody

BY JODY VALLEY

Stop bringing me down



Jody Valley. Obituary photo

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR



This letter is referencing the article “They Won’t Put Us Back in the Closet: Michigan Leaders Respond to Trump’s Anti-LGBTQ+ Orders,” which was published in the Feb. 6 issue of *Between The Lines*.

Dear Editorial Team,

I am writing as a dedicated reader who deeply values the role BTL plays in amplifying LGBTQ+ voices and advocating for our community. However, I was disappointed to see that your recent article covering Trump’s anti-LGBTQ+ executive orders lacked any direct representation from trans voices, despite the fact that transgender individuals are the most impacted by these policies.

The article quotes three cisgender white women, two of whom are straight, as the primary voices discussing this issue. While their advocacy is important, the omission of transgender voices — particularly trans women, trans men and nonbinary individuals — feels like a significant oversight. It is critical that when discussing policies that directly target trans people, those most affected are given a platform to speak for themselves.

Trans activists, advocates and community leaders are already doing the work on the ground, and their firsthand experiences and expertise would have provided invaluable insight. Groups such as the Trans Sistas of Color Project, Ruth Ellis Center, Transgender Michigan, GNA and individual trans activists in Michigan could have offered perspectives that reflect the reality of those directly impacted by these harmful orders.

BTL has long been a trusted voice for LGBTQ+ Michiganders, and I urge you to be more intentional in ensuring that trans voices are not just included but centered in discussions

about their own rights and survival. I hope to see more inclusive representation in future coverage.

Thank you for your time and for your continued work in serving the LGBTQ+ community.

Kind regards,
Mike Flores

From the Pride Source Editorial Team:

Dear Mike,

Thank you for your thoughtful feedback — we truly appreciate one-on-one engagement with our readers.

We’d love to hear from you! Drop us your comments at editor@pridesource.com.

At BTL, we strive to amplify trans voices and ensure our coverage reflects those most affected. Our recent Jan. 30 pro-trans protest story was written by a trans journalist, and we are committed to centering trans perspectives. That said, we are also keenly aware of the emotional and professional toll these attacks take on trans leaders, activists and community members. Many are already carrying an immense burden — fighting these policies on the ground while also processing their personal impact.

While we strive to prioritize trans voices, we also want to ensure we’re not adding to that burden by asking for statements or interviews in already overwhelming moments. Local trans advocate Julisa Abad’s essay on the dark side of advocacy has been at the forefront of our minds as we navigate this balance.

But your point is well taken, and we will continue working to ensure trans voices remain at the forefront of our reporting. We welcome any additional recommendations you have on trans leaders and organizations in Michigan.

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Trump Is Erasing Transgender People, Past and Present



BY D'ANNE WITKOWSKI

Greetings from New Orleans. I'm writing this at my dearest friend's house in Algiers Point. I have to admit, I wasn't thrilled with the idea of getting on a plane with the looming prospect of Elon Musk and his Teen Fascism Brigade playing with the Federal Aviation Administration like a game of RollerCoaster Tycoon. But here I am!

And hopefully, I will make it home alive, because since I've gotten here, things with the FAA have only gotten worse.

There's no aspect of life that the Trump-Musk Administration isn't going to fuck up and make harder for literally every person in the U.S., including the dumb fucks who voted for Trump (mind you, no one voted for Musk, but joke's on all of us, I guess!). This is especially true for people that Trump and Musk don't like: Black, brown, indigenous and other people of color, women, LGBTQ+ people, people with disabilities, immigrants, asylum seekers, the poor, the mentally ill, unionized workers... The list goes on and on.

The damage that Trump and Musk are doing to this country and the speed at which they are moving is truly staggering. Every time I look at the news I see another story that makes me want to cry and/or scream and/or puke.

We are literally witnessing the government erase trans people in the past and present, which certainly doesn't bode well for the future.

But today I want to talk about transgender erasure. And if you're thinking, "Ugh. Another column about transgender people?" then you are more than welcome to fuck off.

Protesters gathered at the Stonewall National Monument in New York City on Valentine's Day after all



references to transgender people were removed from The National Park Service's website.

"[T]he words 'transgender' and 'queer' had been deleted from text that had been on the site," reports CBS News. "Also, the letters T and Q were cut from various references to the acronym LGBTQ and replaced with phrases like the 'LGB rights movement' or 'LGB civil rights.'"

If you know anything about the Stonewall Riot, then you know that transgender people had a hell of a lot to do with this pivotal moment in LGBTQ+ history, especially Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera. Now, according to the federal government, Johnson and Rivera didn't exist and do not matter.

"They're trying to literally cis-wash, if you will, LGBTQ history by taking trans folks and saying they didn't exist then and don't exist now," Stacy Lentz, CEO of The Stonewall Inn Gives Back Initiative and a co-owner of

The Stonewall Inn, told CBS News. "It is very alarming."

Alarming is one word for it. We are literally witnessing the government erase trans people in the past and present, which certainly doesn't bode well for the future. And let's be clear, we're talking about Republicans here. While there are some Democrats who are awful on this issue,

trans-erasure is a pivotal part of the Republican platform.

At the protest, people were bearing signs like "No T? All Shade!" and "Can't spell HIS-ORY without the T," according to author Hugh Ryan who was at the protest and wrote about it for Slate.

"[A]s a queer historian, I know that the erasure of history, while it might seem unimportant in the moment, is in fact always a crucial step on the road to autocracy," wrote Ryan. "Indeed, the specific case of 'deleting' trans people from the record is an action with a deeply troubling, almost century-old precedent — one that should motivate us all to resist its repetition aggressively today."

In other words, this is scary as hell. For everyone, not just trans people. Ryan also brings up the fact that there are people in the LGBTQ+ community who don't actually want transgender people to exist, either.

"There is a contingent of people even in the gay community who are actively working to distance themselves from trans people and to erase our historical connections," Hugh writes. "For them, 'LGB' is not vandalism, but a victory. However, let's be clear here too: These people are absolutely wrong, and making this argument is a sign of their willful ignorance and transphobia. Because if there is one place in American history where trans existence has been well documented for decades, it's Stonewall."

And while willful ignorance and transphobia are all the rage in the U.S. right now, any "LGB" individual who thinks that this has nothing to do with them is sorely mistaken. If you aren't standing up for transgender people right now, you're complicit in this erasure effort.

THE SCROLL

QUICK HITS & CAN'T MISSES

'Hot AF': Detroit's Got the Chills, But Cold As Hell Brings the Thrills

LGBT Detroit, North America's premier Black LGBTQ+ organization, is turning up the heat this winter with its fifth annual Cold As Hell series. The KinkySexyHealthy streaming event, launching Feb. 24, brings together leading voices in the leather and fetish communities for an evening of education, empowerment and exploration.

This year's hosts include Baltimore's Master S'ango, Dallas-based Sir Apocalypse, and hometown favorites Brown

Bomber Bear and BLK Widow. As the marquee component of LGBT Detroit's health campaign, Cold As Hell creates an inclusive space for Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ individuals to discuss sexuality, kink and wellness.

The free event continues LGBT Detroit's tradition of innovative programming that began with Hotter Than July, now addressing crucial health topics through engaging virtual content. Previous years have featured demonstrations, panel discussions and interactive experiences suitable for both curious newcomers and scene veterans.

Tune in at ColdAsHell.org for an evening that promises to be educational, entertaining and, as organizers say, "hot AF."



Sir Apocalypse. Photo: Instagram/@WalterHouston1

'You Cannot Erase Us': Stonewall Veteran Slams Monument Changes

In a move critics are calling an assault on trans history, the National Park Service has stripped references to transgender and queer people from the Stonewall National Monument website after a presidential executive order limiting federal recognition to just two sexes. The changes sparked immediate protests at the historic Greenwich Village site.

"The spirit of Stonewall means to be visible and fight back against oppression," said Mark Segal, who at 18 helped launch the modern LGBTQ+ rights movement during the 1969 Stonewall uprising. "This petty, vindictive action is an attempt to erase not only trans people from public view but also the entire LGBTQ+ community," added Segal, founder of the Philadelphia Gay News.

The site of the watershed 1969 rebellion against police raids became a national monument in 2016, with its groundbreaking LGBTQ+ visitor center opening in June 2024. Now, like the uprising it commemorates, it's once again at the center of a fight for recognition and respect.



Donna Dear (left) and Paulette Green. Photo: The Center for Cultural Power

Howell Mom's LGBTQ+ Art Project Takes Flight

A mother's raw emotional response to post-election fears has blossomed into a powerful nationwide art exhibition celebrating LGBTQ+ solidarity. Howell artist Lora Garcelon,

parent of gay and trans children, initially channeled her anxiety by hurling paint and objects at watercolor paper in her yard. That cathartic moment sparked The Together Art Project, now featured at Cleary University in conservative Livingston County.

The exhibition showcases four 4-by-4-foot collages incorporating 100 individual squares contributed by allies and LGBTQ+ community members aged 8 to 91. Participants

transformed 7-inch watercolor squares into personal messages of support, featuring everything from Lady Gaga sheet music to landmark Supreme Court decision excerpts.

This project is open to the public at Cleary Commons (3750 Cleary Drive, Howell), Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., until the end of February.

Elton John and Brandi Carlile Announce Album

Music icons and LGBTQ+ champions Elton John and Brandi Carlile are joining forces on "Who Believes In Angels?," releasing April 4 via Interscope Records. The groundbreaking collaboration between the gay trailblazer and lesbian powerhouse, produced by Andrew Watt, marries their distinctive styles while celebrating their authentic voices. Recorded in 20 days at L.A.'s Sunset Sound, the album culminates in an intimate London Palladium performance on March 26, promising a historic moment in queer music legacy.

A Queer New Vision for Oz

Dorothy's yellow brick road is getting a fresh coat of paint. The University of Michigan's Theatre and Drama department is reimagining Oz with a bold new vision, transforming the beloved classic through a BIPOC and queer lens. Opening April 12, "Our Oz" promises to shake up everything you thought you knew about the Emerald City. Under the creative direction of professors José Casas and Jake Hooker, UM students are bringing their own magic to this timeless tale of self-discovery. Watch for tickets at smt.d.umich.edu and a BTL spotlight on this show in an upcoming issue.

Queer Black Couple Captures Harriet Tubman's Legacy

On the very Maryland land where Harriet Tubman once guided people to freedom, a remarkable love story blooms alongside environmental justice. Military veteran Donna Dear and educator Paulette Greene, who found each other in 1974, now steward Mt. Pleasant Acres Farms — 111 acres of historic Underground Railroad territory. Their award-winning documentary "The Aunties" is now streaming on YouTube through Black Public Media's AfroPoP Digital Shorts, sharing their mission of sustainability and heritage preservation while honoring Tubman's liberatory legacy.

Michigan's Chuckie Benson Charts His Own Path in Historic Theater Tour

Actor brings first August Wilson tour to his old haunting grounds

BY BRIDGETTE M. REDMAN

When Chuckie Benson returns to Michigan this month, it will be a homecoming where both his hometown and college community can see how he's grown — both as a serious actor and as a Black, queer artist deep into his professional career.

The Acting Company's touring troupe brings August Wilson's "Two Trains Running" to the Miller Auditorium in Kalamazoo on March 21 and the Wharton Center in East Lansing on March 22. Benson grew up in Lansing, attending Waverly High School and then earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in music theater performance from Western Michigan University.

Since then, he's gone on to capture Jeff Awards nominations for his work in Chicago, toured with the national company of "Spamilton" and performed with the Oregon Shakespeare Company, among others.

He recently made the move to New York where he was cast in "The Color Purple" at the Geva Theatre and then landed the job with The Acting Company, an iconic theater founded in 1972 that has launched the careers of more than 400 actors, including Kevin Kline and Patti LuPone.

"Being in the company of these brilliant artists does blow my mind," Benson said. "It's like, dang, Chuckie, what a way to start your first year out in New York — you joined The Acting Company."

This tour marks the first time the Wilson estate has ever given permission for an August Wilson play to go on tour.

"Straight shows don't tour at all," Benson said. "It's a blessing to get 'Two Trains' out to people who don't really get a chance to see his work. The importance and gravitas of what we're doing...to be able to be the first to bring his work around the country in this manner is pretty cool."

"There's no limits to what we [as LGBTQ+ actors] can do. I can be my authentic self and still play a character who is opposite of who I am... There are no rules because art is art."

— Chuckie Benson

While only "Two Trains Running" will be performed in Michigan, the company is also touring Shakespeare's "Comedy of Errors." Benson plays Hambone in "Two



Chuckie Benson. Photo: The Acting Company

Trains Running" and Dromio of Ephesus in "Comedy of Errors."

Hambone, a character suffering from mental impairment, says only one line in the play, though he says it many times and in many ways, repeating the line, "He is gonna give me my ham."

"That line holds so much and has so many meanings," Benson said. "I explored his language because the script says he says this idiotically over and over again. Instead of jumping to the word 'idiotically' I really wanted to explore why he is saying this over and over again. What happened to this man to get him the way he is? ... I believe Hambone was an artist."

The play is set in 1968, a time, Benson points out, when few children with learning disabilities, especially Black children, received appropriate diagnoses or care.

"It was a really brutal and harsh part of our American history with what they would do with people such as this," Benson said. "Some kids were just dropped off at mental institutions. Some of the characters [in "Two Trains Running"] talk about Hambone — they say Hambone understands better than us, and he does."

Benson learned myriad ways to say his one line to infuse it with multiple meanings. He described the character as being heavy and weighted, a person who forms the heart



A scene from “Two Trains Running,” featuring Chuckie Benson. Photo: The Acting Company

of the piece. It was important, he said, to approach the character respectfully and not play him like a stereotype.

“I thank Lili-Anne Brown for entrusting me to do the work that I know I could do,” Benson said. “She trusted that I would bring out a side that nobody would have seen before. That’s the brilliance of August Wilson’s work, because he gives you what he gives you and then you have to go figure it out. All these characters are based on real life and pertain to the Black community,” Brown’s support for Benson dates back to when he was 19 and she cast him in “Hairspray” at Timberlake Playhouse in Illinois.

That early support proved crucial as Benson expanded his repertoire beyond musical theater. While he embraced complex dramatic roles like Hambone, there was one theatrical tradition he initially resisted. In high school, playing multiple roles in plays and musicals — from Tevye in “Fiddler on the Roof” to Grandpa Joe in “Willy Wonka” and the lead in “Arsenic and Old Lace” — Benson deliberately sat out when his school tackled Shakespeare.

“I swore up and down that I can’t stand Billy Shakes and I was not going to do Shakespeare,” Benson said. “I did see [the high school production of] ‘Midsummer’ and thought it was great — but I did not like Billy Shakes.”

Then he got to college and had to do a deep dive into “Measure for Measure.” His opinion started to change and he says he’s becoming a full-fledged Shakespeare nerd. While “Measure for Measure” was long his favorite show, he now says that “Comedy of Errors” has supplanted that.

“It is bananas and no one does it,” Benson said, adding that he feels a kinship to his character. “Dromio is a comedy queen, which is totally me. He’s got a smart-ass mouth...everybody tells me all their bull

and I just have to deal with it. I just love the sassiness of him.”

While there was a time early in his career where he was given the message that he needed to play it straight as a Black man if he wanted to get cast, he’s now in a place where he has gotten beyond this notion. He recalls facing pressure to conform to narrow expectations of Black masculinity in theater.

“There’s no limits to what we [as LGBTQ+ actors] can do,” Benson said. “I can be my authentic self and still play a character who is opposite of who I am, whether that is where I hold my masculinity, whether it is where I fit on the sexuality spectrum or with a gender. There are no rules because art is art.”

This tour, he said, provides an opportunity for representation as it allows Benson and actors like him to play Wilson and Shakespeare characters and just exist as who they are. The freedom to bring his full self to classic roles traditionally bound by rigid expectations of masculinity feels particularly meaningful.

“That’s the beauty of being an actor,” Benson said. “You can just play and fill in the holes.”

For Benson, his upcoming Michigan homecoming is more than just a return to familiar stages that played important roles in forming him as an actor. It’s a testament to the years of dedication, growth and authenticity that he’s poured into his craft. He looks forward to performing for audiences who knew him in his youth but have never seen him as a professional actor, especially with his portrayal of Hambone.

“They don’t know the over decade of work that has been spilled into this,” Benson said. “At the end of the day, I am proud to bring this piece to my home and my alma mater.”



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The Incredible 53-Year Legacy of Grand Rapids' Apartment Lounge

From AIDS crisis to modern threats, the iconic bar remains a sanctuary in West Michigan

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

On a nervous 21st birthday venture into what would become his future, Bobby Johnson walked into The Apartment Lounge's previous location in Grand Rapids. The bar was filled with patrons in their 30s and 40s — "old" to his young eyes — during happy hour. Milt Lennox, one of the owners at the time, along with his life partner Ed Ladner, called out for his driver's license and made an announcement to the crowd. Johnson wondered what he'd gotten himself into.

"Shut up and sit down," Johnson recalled Lennox telling him. "I'm going to buy you your first legal drink and tell you a story." That one drink turned into many, as the bar's patrons spent five hours sharing stories with the birthday boy. Then came the pranks: Lennox directed Johnson to a nonexistent dance floor upstairs in the three-story building. Red-faced and embarrassed, Johnson declared, "You embarrassed me in front of the whole wide gay world on my 21st birthday. If you ever sell this bar, you better sell it to me."

He couldn't have known then that Lennox and Ladner would take that declaration to heart. Years later, on the day of his death in 2015, Lennox revealed to Johnson why he'd been chosen as successor: "I've watched you grow. I've watched you change. You run one of the largest companies in town. You've never taken advantage of anybody. And you are always the first one to stop to help," Johnson reminisced recently, wiping tears from his eyes.

That passing of the torch would make Johnson only the second owner in The Apartment Lounge's 53-year history. He says that Lennox and Ladner were "two of the most important people that ever touched my life," teaching him to "always think outside the box and never let anybody define me." Johnson had come out at 15, in an era

just before the AIDS crisis would devastate the community. His coming out story — being told by his Italian Catholic mother to "go away and come back tomorrow," only to return to unconditional acceptance — helped shape his understanding of the importance of safe spaces and love.

The Apartment Lounge first opened its doors in 1972 on the corner of Monroe and Fulton in Grand Rapids, popular especially among the leather crowd. In 1988, it found its



The Apartment Lounge. Courtesy photo

We need to remember and we need to share with the younger people that we've been through this once — more than once... We're stronger in groups. And in today's world, [people] are real quick to shoot off. I just don't want people to get themselves in a place where they're alone. We don't want anybody dying for this.

— Bobby Johnson, owner of The Apartment Lounge

"This happens every 35 years or so in history where you get the influx of all this again, but he's already worn it out," he added.

During his youth, Johnson endured harassment, recounting how he was "chased by people and called everything under the sun." Recently, when confronted by someone shouting slurs from a passing car while walking his dog, he responded with the confidence of what he calls an "old queen" who's seen it all before: "Maybe you should suck a dick and maybe then you would know who you actually are." The bully squealed off.

"We need to remember and we need to share with the younger people that we've been through this once — more than once," Johnson reflected, drawing parallels between past struggles and present challenges. His concern for the community's safety is palpable: "We stuck together in groups and that's what I want to encourage everybody to do. We're stronger in groups. And in today's world, [people] are real quick to shoot off. I just don't want people to get themselves in a place where they're alone. We don't want

permanent home at 33 Sheldon Ave. NE, where it continues to stand as a beacon of hope and resistance. For over five decades, this establishment — one of the longest-running LGBTQ+ bars not just in Michigan but in the entire U.S. — has represented far more than just a place to gather.

Today, under Johnson's stewardship, the establishment continues to serve as a crucial gathering place for LGBTQ+ individuals and allies alike. "I've never been as afraid for people as I am today," he said, because the Trump administration is trying to "recreate the fear and the domination and all of the things that were the norm back then."



Milt Lennox, Bobby Johnson and Ed Ladner. Courtesy photo

anybody dying for this.”

On a September night nearly six weeks ahead of the 2024 election, the air inside The Apartment Lounge was thick with something both electric and comforting. A warmth emanated through the long, narrow space, not just from the low amber glow of the bar lights, but from the quiet camaraderie of those gathered. At the bar, a lone patron sat absorbed in the flickering screen of their propped-up iPad, lost in a world of pixels. Elsewhere, friends leaned into each other at the bar and in booths, cocktails in hand. Being inside The Apartment Lounge felt like a relic from a time when queer bars didn’t need to be anything more than what they had always been — safe harbors. A place to take a seat, order a drink and simply belong.

“Being able to work at a business that has served as a safe space in the LGBTQ+ community for over 50 years is such an honor,” said bartender Matt Stark, who joined The Apartment Lounge in early 2023. “When I first started working here, I thought this bar was just known by Grand Rapids locals, but I soon learned that we get customers from all around the country. It’s always so cool to see new faces that tell me they try to come here whenever they visit the state. The work this bar does to give back to the community also warms my heart.”

This legacy of community service stretches back decades. As Johnson explained, “I’ve helped so many organizations. Lennox and Ladner gave the startup money for the Red Project and the [Grand Rapids] Pride Center that helped all of those organizations get started. And back when the AIDS epidemic hit, they actually brought information to Grand Rapids about the epidemic and what was going on, because we weren’t allowed to know.”

“He was always very selfless,” Johnson reflected on Lennox’s influence, “and that, I think, was kind of cool for me because

in our community, so many people spend so much time trying to impress. But he genuinely just cared about people, and that’s how I am. It’s important to me that we take care of people, it’s important to me that we do fundraisers to help organizations.”

As for Stark, he has discovered that his role extends far beyond mixing drinks and closing tabs. What began as a bartending job has evolved into something more meaningful — a chance to be part of a legacy of community care and connection.

“Working here for such a short amount of time has shown me how much of an impact a small bar could have on an entire community. This place just makes me feel proud to go to work every day. Even on days that I don’t feel like tending bar, it’s nice to know that I still might be helping someone just by showing up to work and showing them kindness and hospitality.”

In 2022, amid the ongoing impact of the pandemic, The Apartment Lounge was honored by Bubly Sparkling as one of just four venues designated as “safe spaces” in the entire U.S. As part of this recognition, the lounge received a grant to help sustain operations during a challenging time for LGBTQ+ spaces.

“That made me feel amazing — that we were still able to do that and give people a place to be themselves,” Johnson said, “and we will continue to do that. That’s who we are and that’s what we’re going to continue to do because we’re not going anywhere.”

Long before Johnson became the steward of one of Michigan’s most historic LGBTQ+ establishments, his entrepreneurial spirit was already in full swing.

“I busted my butt for everything I have,” recalled Johnson, who grew up in a middle-class family. His childhood hustle was impressive — at just 6, he was shoveling his neighbors’ snow. “Figured out that if I bought shovels that I could

See **Apartment Lounge**, page 19



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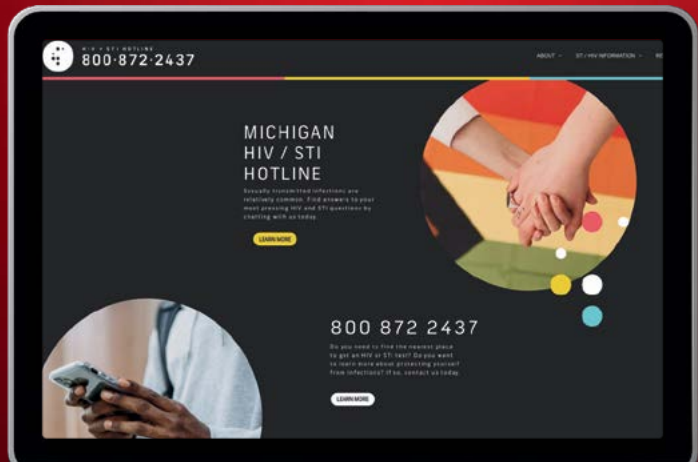
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How Grand Rapids' Easttown Became a Haven for the LGBTQ+ Community

Intentional inclusivity at the heart of this welcoming collection of queer-owned and welcoming businesses

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

Just outside downtown Grand Rapids, there's a neighborhood where rainbow crosswalks brighten the streets year-round, where banned books find sanctuary on open shelves and where a cup of coffee comes with an unconditional promise of acceptance. This is Easttown, a historic district that has evolved into one of West Michigan's most vibrant LGBTQ-inclusive communities.

The transformation of this early 20th-century neighborhood into a beacon of inclusivity didn't happen by accident. It's the result of intentional efforts by business owners, community leaders and residents who understand that creating safe spaces requires more than just hanging a Pride flag in the window.

The Easttown Community Association (ECA) has made intentional inclusivity central to its mission, according to Stephen Staggs, ECA's program coordinator. "During last year's strategic planning session, the ECA Board of Directors settled on three strategic goals for 2024, one of which was to increase our diversity, equity and inclusion efforts," he says.

These efforts have yielded impressive results. According to Staggs, 93% of businesses at the neighborhood's annual Bizarre Bazaar event and 85% at the summer Streetfair festival were owned by racial and ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities. And the neighborhood's annual Pride Crosswalk Refresh every June has become a cherished tradition, symbolizing the permanent welcome extended to the LGBTQ+ community.

Community engagement runs deep in Easttown. According to Staggs, last year alone, 415 residents volunteered their time for various neighborhood initiatives, from clean-ups to family-friendly activities. The ECA has partnered with organizations like the Grand Rapids Trans Foundation and Grand Rapids Pride Center to expand their programming and reach, he says. Staggs reports that Easttown's Community Bike Ride Program, developed in partnership with the MLK Park Neighborhood Association, creates another avenue for inclusive community building, while the community garden program has been revived post-Covid with an explicit focus on creating an all-inclusive, welcoming environment.

Walking down Wealthy Street, the neighborhood's main thoroughfare, visitors

encounter a diverse array of queer-owned and queer-friendly businesses that form Easttown's backbone. Visitors and residents often start their mornings at Good Judy's (1146 Wealthy St. SE), a gay-owned juice bar where fresh-pressed fruit creations come with a side of social consciousness. The bright, healthy space sources its products primarily from businesses founded by women, persons of color and members of the LGBTQ+ community.

For those seeking comfort food with a twist, Basalt (1450 Wealthy St. SE) offers what the Mexican-influenced cafe describes as being "like a diner, but better." This queer-owned establishment masterfully balances dive bar charm with hipster elegance, serving up unique tacos and thoughtful vegetarian options. Their motto — "all kinds, except the unkind, are welcome here" — perfectly encapsulates Easttown's welcoming spirit.

The neighborhood's shopping scene reflects its celebratory approach to individuality. The quirky Rebel gift shop (1555 Wealthy St. SE) and its sister store, Sticky Fingers (1503 Lake Dr. SE), offer a delightful mix of unique gifts and nostalgic candy treats. Nearby Fox Naturals (619 Wealthy St. SE) provides locally crafted skincare and beauty products in a warm, welcoming atmosphere.

Just down the street, another testament to Grand Rapids' increasingly inclusive spirit can be found at Chartreuse Sisters, a micro bakery cafe housed in a renovated 1900s drugstore. The queer-owned business, run by two sisters with deep roots in the neighborhood, represents the area's evolution. "Being a queer-owned business, it is important for us to provide a safe space for our community," sisters Alyson and Mallory Caillaud-Jones told BTL via email. "We grew up in Easttown and have seen the neighborhood evolve to include many more queer-inclusive and owned businesses."

Their vision for the space reflects both historical appreciation and modern inclusivity: "We are a micro bakery cafe run by two sisters who renovated a 1900s drugstore to create a community space where historical charm meets elegant decor reminiscent of a European cafe." Their goal, they say, is "to create an inclusive space for people looking to experience elevated, innovative pastries, lattes and teas."

The heart of this transformation can be found in places like Lotus Brew (211 Diamond St. SE), which has evolved from humble beginnings. Owner Max Freeman recalls, "We started off as

a small stall in the Fulton Street Farmers Market and grew into a coffee shop a year or so later. I've had a unique experience where I got to talk directly with my community about the changes they want to see and the spaces they want to uphold. A lot of what we do started with us asking, 'What can we do better as a supportive space?'"

Freeman's commitment to community support takes many forms. "We started a banned book library that's completely free to the public and has a 92% return rate, as well as a community pantry and a kindness cup program," he explains. The shop's kindness cup fund ensures that "anyone in need" can get a drink, Freeman explains.

Lotus Brew's mission extends beyond immediate community needs. "The kindness cup, pantry, library and shop space are free to use with no expectation of supporting the space. We've even been listed recently as a city warming center as well," Freeman says. "A lot of folks want to support our mission and we eventually made a change to the kindness cup fund where half would support the space and the other half would support the community fund."

Lotus Brew's commitment to fair labor practices is equally strong. "Both on the community and business side we push to do better. Our baristas start at \$20 an hour base [pay] and keep whatever tips they make," Freeman notes, adding an important reminder about workers' rights: "It's illegal for restaurant owners to take tips." He often urges workers to understand their rights.

For Freeman, creating this kind of affirming space is deeply personal. "I poured so much of myself into this because it's the right thing to do," he says. "There was a need for a community space that accepts folks as they are and a good night alternative that was alcohol-free. We started a lot of social groups from this to foster a community where folks could meet others, date and make lifelong friends and found family."

The impact of these efforts is visible in the



Rebel gift shop in Grand Rapids' Easttown. Photo: Sarah Bricker Hunt

daily transformations that occur within these spaces. "I've seen folks come in for the first time; they're apprehensive, nervous and possibly just starting to come out or accept themselves," Freeman shares. "I've seen that anxiety melt away slowly where they start to make friends, wear more gender-affirming clothing and [are] able to breathe and live as their true selves."

In the face of current political challenges, Freeman remains determined. "The current political climate is impacting everyone very hard. Everything on the government's side along with the tech oligarchies blatantly supporting a fascist clown," he notes, adding that Lotus Brew's community library was created to "preserve our history." Sharing physical media, he says, can be a radical act. "Our space was made to be a sanctuary and gathering space for folks not only to find family but also to organize and come together as a community."

As Easttown's queer community faces an uncertain future in a challenging political and social era, Freeman's message to the community resonates with both realism and hope, and the spirit of a neighborhood that really does feel like sanctuary in a challenging era: "I can't promise my community everything will be OK. I can promise that there is hope and strength in numbers. We will do everything in our power to support this hope in any way we can. You are not alone, you are loved and welcome as you are. We will always be there for you — I'm so glad you're still here."



Apartment Lounge

Continued from page 17

have the neighbor kids shovel and I could keep half the money at 8,” he said. By 12 years old, he had expanded into a successful lawn care operation. When his mother told him that if he wanted air conditioning in the house, he’d have to pay for it himself — a cost of \$900 — he handed her \$1,000. Not only did he purchase three air conditioners for his family’s home, but he also covered their summer electric bills.

At 14, he was managing an ice cream parlor owned by his neighbors. When they announced their divorce and plans to sell the business for \$18,000, Johnson saw an opportunity. His mom was skeptical: “Where are you going to get \$18,000?” Without hesitation, Johnson went upstairs, retrieved his Kent Bank book, and came back down. His mother was stunned to see he had \$20,000 in savings. “I said, ‘When is the last time anybody paid attention to me? Literally. When is the last time anybody paid attention to me?’” he recalled.

This early display of financial acumen and work ethic foreshadowed Johnson’s future business achievements. Now, Johnson is establishing The Apartment Lounge Foundation, set to launch in June. The foundation will focus on driving social change by providing \$50,000 in scholarships to LGBTQ+ youth in its inaugural year, while also supporting political organizations that champion LGBTQ+ rights. Johnson’s philanthropic



(Top) Staff at The Apartment Lounge, including Matt Stark (far right). (Bottom) Bobby Johnson at the ribbon cutting for the street mural Rainbow Road.

work extends far beyond these public initiatives — he says he has quietly donated millions of dollars to various causes, preferring to make an impact without seeking recognition.

“My friends are always like, ‘You’d have so much more money if you didn’t worry about everybody else,’” he said. His response to them: “But if I don’t, who’s going to?”

Meanwhile, the establishment’s annual Pride Sunday celebration, held on Father’s Day, has grown from 107 attendees to nearly 2,400 people, becoming what Johnson calls “the party of the year.” Johnson has structured the ownership through a trust to ensure the establishment’s future remains secure. “Nothing can ever happen to it,” he explained. “My trust owns everything. I’m the landlord. We’re not going to have to worry about anybody being able to touch us ever.”

His message to the community and fellow leaders is clear: “If you’re in a position of leadership, we all need to stick together. Now is the time to spread our voices, spread our wings and make sure that we’re protecting each other, sticking together and not letting them win.”

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Fortune Feimster on Being the Representation She Once Needed as a Gay Southerner

How the comedian is bringing hope to America's most challenging spaces

BY CHRIS AZZOPARDI

Fortune Feimster may not wear a cape or leap tall buildings, but she might just be a superhero. Her superpower? Making us laugh until we forget why we needed saving in the first place.

In an America that often feels like a punchline without the comedy, Feimster offers both relief from the chaos and inspiration to keep pushing forward. With three Netflix specials and over a million Instagram followers, she's built her career transforming life's absurdities into moments of pure hilarity. Her latest Netflix special, "Crushing It," tackles everything from marriage to navigating life as an out gay person — including the moment she and her wife Jacquelyn "Jax" Smith realized their honeymoon destinations weren't exactly LGBTQ-friendly.

As Feimster tours this year, stopping for two shows in Grand Rapids on May 16 at the DeVos Performance Hall, she isn't just serving up jokes — she says her shows have evolved into spaces where queer people and allies can laugh, connect and feel seen.

During our conversation, Feimster opened up about the deeper impact of her comedy, from helping parents better understand their LGBTQ+ kids to reaching audiences in conservative areas where visibility matters most. She also reflects on the fears surrounding marriage equality, why she and her wife Jax rushed to the altar after Ruth Bader Ginsburg's death, and what gives her hope despite today's political climate.

With everything happening right now — the political climate, the fires so close to your home — how are you holding up?

The fires really just made all of us, at least in L.A., stop in our tracks and go, "Holy cow." So devastating. We're just kind of coming out of that, and then all this other stuff is happening. You do what you can and then just have to focus on getting back out there



Fortune Feimster. Courtesy photo

and just trying to bring levity to the situation in any way you can because you feel so helpless to know what to do otherwise.

What does it mean to you to do what you can?

I think there's a lot of people who want people in the public eye to fix things. And you're like, "This is so big!" I know it comes from a place of other people not knowing what to do, so maybe you'll know what to do, but I'm right there with everybody else.

So all I know how to do is to continue to be representation, hopefully positive representation, and to keep reminding people we exist and have a voice and are people and have love and have problems and have all the same trials and tribulations as anyone else, as any straight person I know. And there's power in sharing our stories and being out and being proud. That's the best I know how to do right now

— just continuing to be some sort of positive voice out there in the mix of all the negativity.

In "Crushing It," you open up the show talking about how, for your honeymoon, you accidentally went to countries where being gay is illegal. That must be eye-opening for straight fans of yours who aren't familiar with these laws in other countries. How do you think your comedy in the next few years can reach across the aisle?

The whole point [of that bit] was to say everyone gets comfortable and thinks, "Oh, gay rights are solved. Marriage equality exists, so you must be OK and we're fine in our country." That's what I'm saying is the perspective, I think, of people who aren't in the community. I wanted to point out the fact that there are

many places where it's not safe to go, where you can be arrested, and this still exists in these times. Through comedy, I get that point across.

I'm never going to be the political commentary comic, the social issues comic. There are people so much smarter than me who are so much more aware and so much better at presenting those facts and stories. I can only do it in my way, which is to let me tell you a funny story of something that happened to me. But the underlying part of that is, "This is scary, it sucks." There's so much further to go in this fight for equality, not only in our country but the whole world.

So yeah, I hope to continue to tell stories like that, like I did in my "Sweet & Salty" special, where I tell my coming out story. Even though it's masked by a funny story of going to a Hooters restaurant and then telling my mom at a Chinese restaurant later, the underlying part of that is it's really hard to come out. I just think

humor is a powerful tool — if you can make people laugh, they listen. And if they're really hearing you, the underlying message comes through.

When in your career did you know people really were listening to your message?

A byproduct of my standup that I just didn't realize would exist is that, through a platform like Netflix, you're getting to tell your stories in front of people who might not have watched you otherwise. So straight people watch, conservative people watch, males watch. I don't think men were normally coming to my shows as much before, but on Netflix, they'll sit there and watch. It's cool to open minds in that way.

During the pandemic when "Sweet & Salty" came out, so many people were at home, so they saw something they might have not seen otherwise. I got a ton of messages that I didn't expect from straight people saying, "I never realized how hard it was to come out, what that meant and the fear that gay people must go through in having that conversation." And that was a really amazing thing to hear from men, these dads. I also had parents say to me, "I've had an inkling that my kid might be gay, but they had never come out to me or felt comfortable. And so we watched your special together and that made them feel like they could open up at the end of it." Or I've had young people say, "I was scared to tell my parents I was gay, but when I saw them laugh at your jokes, I felt safe to come out to them." I couldn't believe that. Because I'm just sharing my own stories.

With your upcoming tour, you have many stops in more conservative states, like North Carolina and Kentucky. Why is it important for you to show up in those places?

I never shy away from those places because I was there in North Carolina at one point and I desperately needed someone like me to speak to me. I think I would've come

out much sooner had there been representation, had I seen a lesbian comic come through town when I was 18. That could have made a huge impact on me. And it just didn't happen as much back then because it was not as welcoming or accepted to be gay. I didn't have YouTube or "Will & Grace." So I think about what I needed growing up in a small conservative town in the South, and that still exists for a lot of people, even though they have a lot more access and there's a lot more representation. To go to these red states and these conservative areas and be an out, proud gay person and to tell my stories and have the audience full of people who relate to those stories or people who are just like me and they want to support me, it's powerful.

Sometimes I'll get people saying "Why would you go to Florida?" when Don't Say Gay was happening, or when the drag ban was happening in Nashville. I'm like, "This is when we have to go." Because in Nashville, I did the Ryman. That was 2,800 people. And I said, "I can't change the laws here, I can't make the legislation be different, but I can provide a place where 2,800 people can come and look around and see allies, to see other gay people." And that's

powerful to know that we have each other and can go out into the world and spread a more positive message to help, little by little, to change legislation by voting, by volunteering, making a difference. It has to start in these smaller ways.

Your wife Jax is from Michigan. When you stop here for a show, do the in-laws all pile in a van and come see you?

Yes. Her family's so amazing and has been incredibly supportive of me from the minute we started dating. I remember our first year together: I had shows at a comedy club in Royal Oak, and her dad threw a little party before the show and all her family came. And her mom is always coming to shows in different states. They're all just so supportive and proud. And Jax has been out since she was 15 and has always stood firm in who she is. And to have that kind of love and support... because Michigan, as you know more than anybody, can be pretty conservative in certain areas as well.

What are some of your favorite spots in Grand Rapids to go to when you're in town?

Gosh, I haven't spent as much time in Grand Rapids, only because when we visit our family it's in either Royal Oak or up in the peninsula area. I do like Madcap Coffee. I'm a big coffee person. When I'm there, I often look for where the rainbow flags are and we'll pop into some of those spots and grab a coffee or something to eat, whatever it is. But yeah, I've been going to Grand Rapids since early on in my career, but with touring you get to spend a night, maybe two, and then you're onto the next place. So what I have seen in that time is how much Grand Rapids has grown and has become a really cool city with some really unique and artsy things. And it's not just beer anymore.

I'll never forget Dr. Grins, the comedy club [I performed at] when I first started seeing Jax. And we invited her grandmother to the show, who lived in Hastings. And her sister came and my mom came. And her grandmother. Hastings is very conservative, and I got up on stage and talked about being gay and being with Jax, and her grandmother was just beaming and loved it. And people were coming up to her grandmother afterwards. It was so cool to see this progress made and how proud her grandmother was of Jax and our

relationship.

And again, that's the power of comedy. When you can get up on stage and talk about your life and make people laugh, it really opens people up and softens people up in a way that I don't know other kinds of mediums can.

You and Jax got married in 2020, and I hate to even ask this, but with the current political climate, there's a real fear about the future of marriage equality. Is that something you and Jax talk about? And how do you personally navigate that kind of uncertainty?

It certainly hangs over our heads a bit because I think it's very naive



Fortune Feimster. Photo: Netflix

of people to think that it's not in jeopardy.

Well, look at Roe vs. Wade.

Exactly, yeah. I had extended family tell me, "Oh, you're worried about nothing." And I don't know. "That's easy for you to say, you don't know."

See **Fortune**, page 24

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Nasty Compassion
Puzzle can be found on page 25

A hand holding a Trans flag and a rainbow flag.

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The LGBTQ+ Hub Challenging West Michigan's Conservative Image

Intersectionality and a commitment to joy at the heart of Grand Rapids Pride Center

BY SARAH BRICKER HUNT

As anti-LGBTQ+ legislation sweeps through state capitals across the Midwest and the Trump administration issues a growing list of anti-LGBTQ+ executive orders, one organization in Michigan's second-largest city has transformed itself from a small community center into a vital regional hub of resistance and support.

The Grand Rapids Pride Center (GRPC), nestled in the heart of a city known more for its historically conservative roots than its progressive values, has emerged as what Executive Director Jazz McKinney calls “a beacon of resilience, support and empowerment” for West Michigan's LGBTQ+ community.

“Right now, as the 2-SLGBTQ+ community faces increasing political and social challenges, resources like the Grand Rapids Pride Center are more critical than ever,” McKinney tells BTL. Most of McKinney's time is spent in the busy community center where support groups gather in meeting rooms, volunteers coordinate outreach efforts and people of all ages and backgrounds find refuge in the center's welcoming spaces.

The center's evolution reflects the growing needs of Michigan's LGBTQ+ community. While Detroit and Ann Arbor have long been considered the state's primary LGBTQ+ cultural hubs, Grand Rapids has quietly built a vibrant queer community of its own. This development is particularly significant given the region's traditionally conservative political landscape.

“It's a vibrant, resilient and deeply



Inside the Grand Rapids Pride Center. Photo: Chris Azzopardi



Jazz McKinney. Courtesy photo

connected network of individuals who uplift and support one another in the face of both progress and challenges,” McKinney explains, describing how the local LGBTQ+ community has carved out its space in West Michigan. “What makes it truly special is its commitment to fostering inclusivity, advocacy and celebration in a city that has historically been more

conservative. One of its greatest strengths is its sense of solidarity — whether through grassroots activism, local organizations or community-driven events, people come together to create meaningful change.”

The center's services have expanded dramatically in response to recent political challenges. Beyond traditional support groups and social gatherings, GRPC now offers comprehensive assistance with increasingly urgent needs. “There's a high demand for legal and advocacy resources, particularly for trans and gender expansive individuals navigating name and gender marker changes,” McKinney notes, “as well as those

facing discrimination in housing, healthcare and employment.”

This expansion of services comes at a crucial time for Michigan's LGBTQ+ community. While the state has made progress with increased legal protections, local communities still grapple with discrimination and barriers to access. The center's Therapy Assistance Program has become particularly vital, McKinney notes, connecting community members with affirming mental health professionals who understand their unique experiences in the current political climate. “For young people in particular, having a place where they can find mentorship, guidance and hope for the future is

invaluable,” they add.

For McKinney, a Two-Spirit individual, leading the center through these challenging times carries deep personal significance. “I have a deep belief in my responsibility to the next seven generations,” they explain, sharing the philosophy that drives their work. “This is not my world I am living in — I am simply borrowing it from my children and grandchildren.”

McKinney focuses on the diversity of West Michigan's LGBTQ+ community when making decisions about programming

See **Pride Center**, page 26

MY MOTHER AND THE MICHIGAN/OHIO WAR

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Fortune

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We really don't know. Maybe it's totally fine. But the goal for them for so many years was Roe vs. Wade, and once that box was checked for them, it was like, "Well, what's the focus now?" Because there's got to be a communal focus. And the new focus is now on marriage equality and trans rights.

Who knows what will happen? But it contributed to why we got married as quickly as we did the first time. We had been engaged for a couple years and knew we were going to get married, but just weren't in any hurry to plan a wedding because we're not big planners. And then when Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, we went, "Oh, crap. This changes a lot of things with the Supreme Court. And let's just do it. Let's just go ahead."

Because it means something to us to be married and to get to have that right. To just enter into that kind of thing together meant so much to us, and so that's why we did it. We planned our wedding in two weeks and got married in front of five friends in the pandemic, just because if at some point it got revoked, we wanted to at least have said we got to be married, we got to see what that felt like. And there is something really powerful and special about saying, "My wife." It does mean something. I mean, gay people should be able to experience marriage, they should be able to experience divorce, they should be able to

experience all the things.

With everything going on, it's easy to focus on the negatives — but what's one thing that gives you hope for the queer community right now?

The beauty of my job is I get to go to so many places in so many states and so many cities. I meet thousands of people in a way that I think not as many people have exposure to, but it's just by the nature of my job. And what I see in all these cities are good people, really good people, and kind people, both gay and straight, all over the rainbow, all over the spectrum of all different backgrounds, ages.

And those voices online and political voices, they're all so loud that you think, "Man, there's so much negativity and so much hate." That's so scary. And then I go to all these places and there's so many good people. And I'm given hope in that because I think they exist in so many places and in big numbers, in ways that people kind of don't get to see as much because those loud voices are so loud.

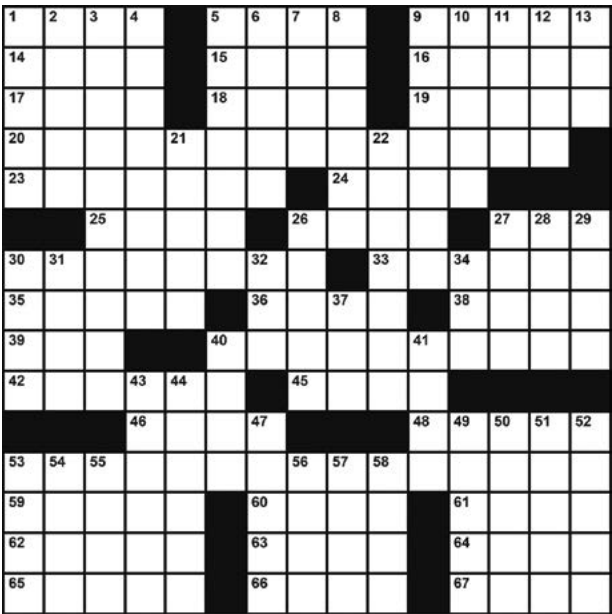
So even in these times when those voices continue to get louder, I have hope that the good people will continue being good and doing good and looking out for each other and making a difference and the bad stuff that happens, that will be squashed by the good at some point and in time.

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and resource allocation. “Our community’s intersectionality is a defining feature,” they say. “It includes people from all backgrounds, with strong leadership and participation from BIPOC, trans and gender expansive, and disabled individuals.”

“What truly sets Grand Rapids’ LGBTQ+ community apart is its unwavering commitment to not just existing but thriving,” McKinney says — even in the face of political and social challenges. “The people here continue to fight for a future where everyone is seen, valued and celebrated. It’s a community built on love, resilience and the determination to create a better, more inclusive world.”

Despite the challenges of leading such a vital organization during turbulent times, McKinney maintains their focus on both the community’s needs and their own well-being. “I remind myself that I cannot pour from an empty cup,” they say. “I lean on my community, take moments to rest, celebrate even the smallest victories and find joy in the people I’m fighting for.”

The center’s daily impact is evident in the steady stream of community members who find their way through its doors. “Every day, I see the impact of the Grand Rapids Pride Center firsthand,” McKinney reflects. “What drives me to keep doing this work, despite the personal toll, is the unwavering belief that my community deserves safety, dignity and joy — seeing the relief in someone’s eyes when they find a safe space, the empowerment of individuals who discover their voice and the resilience of those who keep pushing forward despite adversity.”

The center’s role has become particularly crucial as conservative movements gain momentum across West Michigan, though recent events suggest growing pushback against anti-LGBTQ+ initiatives. In Jamestown Township, voters decisively restored funding to the Patmos Library, 20 miles south of Grand Rapids, in November 2023, after previous attempts to defund it over LGBTQ-themed books had succeeded. The library, which faced closure by fall 2024, won its millage vote with 63% support — a clear rebuke to conservative efforts to remove LGBTQ+ materials from public spaces. Still, the situation has been a reminder that barefaced opposition to the

community persists and, in some circles, is on the rise.

The center’s work takes on added significance as similar battles play out across the region — and now, nationally, under the Trump administration. In neighboring Ottawa County, recent political



Inside the Grand Rapids Pride Center. Photos: Chris Azzopardi

shifts have dramatically illustrated the challenges facing LGBTQ+ communities in the region. In 2023, conservative activists with Ottawa Impact gained control of the county commission, promptly dissolved the county’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion office and changed the county motto from “Where You Belong” to “Where Freedom Rings.” The group’s influence has extended beyond county government, affecting everything from library funding to school board decisions.

Against this backdrop of increasing regional pressure, the center has become more than just a local resource — it’s a model for how LGBTQ+ organizations can thrive and serve their communities, even in traditionally conservative regions. The center’s success in Grand Rapids demonstrates that with dedicated leadership and community support, LGBTQ+ spaces can not only survive but flourish in unexpected places.

Looking ahead, McKinney and their team continue to expand the center’s reach and impact. McKinney sees the center’s work as increasingly vital as the community faces an era of anti-LGBTQ+ political and social backlash not felt for decades. “Community connection is extremely important for helping to combat isolation,” McKinney notes. “People [need to know] they are not alone.”

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MAR 15 / SAT / 2:30PM
Sacred Songs / Treading / Grace

MAR 15 / SAT / 7:30PM
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